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SUBJECT: DESPITE BITTER WORDS, POLITICIANS FIND A WAY TO
CONTINUE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT FORMATION PROCESS

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¶1. (SBU) In a typical twist of Belgian politics, what looked yesterday like an argument that could result in the country's dissolution, now looks like a garden variety row between francophones and Flemings. Shortly before the Flemish members of the lower house Interior Affairs Committee voted unilaterally on November 7 to redistrict a bilingual constituency surrounding Brussels, the leaders of the francophone parties staged a dramatic walkout from the committee room, repaired to a nearby meeting room, and then invoked a little used provision of the constitution that effectively takes the redistricting dispute off the table. These actions precipitated a major flood of whither Belgium analyses in the local and international media, but they have not altered the most important fact. Flemish Christian Democratic leader Yves Leterme has managed for now to retain his mandate to form Belgium's next government. King Albert II confirmed this on November 8, 2007 when he asked Leterme to continue after the latter delivered a report on the current state of affairs.

¶2. (U) The latest turn of events became possible because of the "conflict of interest" clause in Belgium's constitution. Under this provision, action on the redistricting measure must now stop for sixty days while the bill receives consideration from a "conference committee" of the federal government and the various regional and linguistic community governments. Should this procedure not succeed in freezing action, the francophones have further tools available to them, all of which are designed to permit a minority to defend its interests against the majority.

¶3. (U) As the parties determine what to do next, it seems clear now that they will not decide to install an "emergency" government, i.e. an administration charged with handling only urgent social, economic, and foreign policy questions. This is largely at the insistence of the Flemish parties, each of which has announced its intention to continue pursuit of constitutional reforms that redress the balance between federal and regional government powers. Such reforms are still the major demand of two small parties that exercise an important influence on the coalition talks, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a separatist group with five seats, and Front for the Defense of the Francophones (FDF), a Brussels group with just two seats in parliament and a handful in the Brussels regional assembly.

¶4. (U) The present situation also has provided an opening for the francophone Socialists (PS) of Elio Di Rupo. Di Rupo was defeated heavily in the June elections and has since concentrated on dealing with corruption allegations against various party functionaries. He has attempted to cast the redistricting vote as an occasion for the francophones to make clear they will not be dictated to by the Flemish. Fears that he will succeed in reviving PS fortunes are a

prime motivating factor in shaping the position of the two francophone coalition partners in the Liberal (MR) and Christian Democrats (CDH).

15. (SBU) Comment: At this stage, it seems fair to believe that the events of November 7 will not lead to anything more dramatic than a few alarming headlines. That said, the Parliamentary committee's unilateral vote and the aggrieved reaction of the francophone parties underscore an important fact. Belgium's political culture all but mandates its politicians to look at the world first of all through a local lens, not through a national one. Until this situation changes, similar events will continue to occur. Fox

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